



# Literacy Links

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Monthly E-Newsletter of Maine Reading First

*This is the fourth newsletter which is being devoted to one of the five essential elements of reading instruction. The May, 2005 edition of "Literacy Links" provided an in-depth look at reading **fluency**, the June, 2005 edition provided an in-depth look at **vocabulary**, and the September, 2005 edition focused on **phonemic awareness**.*

*This month's edition of "Literacy Links" focuses on **phonics**.*

## Spotlight on... Phonics

Phonics refers to the relationship between the individual sounds, or phonemes, of oral language and the printed letters, or graphemes, of written language. Students who understand phonics can identify the beginning letter of the word *dog* as "d" and can name the letters in the word *bat* as "b", "a", and "t". The goal of phonics instruction is for students to understand and apply the alphabetic principle—the understanding that letters in words stand for specific sounds. Students who demonstrate an understanding of the alphabetic principle can decode new words by applying their understanding of letters and sounds. Phonics instruction is a means to an end with the end being comprehension.

The scientifically based reading research used by the National Reading Panel points to the importance of systematic and explicit phonics instruction. Systematic phonics instruction includes a plan of teaching sets of letter-sound relationships which are carefully selected and logically sequenced. Systematic phonics instruction insures that simpler skills are taught before more complex skills. Explicit phonics instruction refers to instruction which is clear and precise. Following a direct explanation and model of the identified phonics skill, teachers next provide students with an opportunity to practice the skill while they provide support and feedback. The final step of explicit phonics instruction is application of the new phonics skills in many reading and writing activities. Phonics instruction which is not systematic or explicit can produce confusion or missing information for the students and, as a result, students may not be able to successfully apply new skills.

## Summary of Professional Literacy Text... Phonics from A to Z: A Practical Guide

Wiley Blevins has created a professional resource packed with research and practical ideas for teaching phonics. Sections 1 and 2 share background information including the definition and history of phonics instruction. Section 3 of this text, "Learning about Sounds and Letters", includes charts for all of the single consonants, digraphs, and vowels. Each chart begins by identifying a target word to associate with the letter or letter combination. The next part of the chart describes how the sound of the letter(s) is formed and the most



*"Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is more effective than non-systematic or no phonics instruction."*  
Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn, 2001



## Upcoming Events

The 57<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the New England Reading Association (NERA), "Bridging Research and Practice", will be held in 2 locations:

- Marlborough, MA on October 19-20, 2005
- Fairlee, VT on October 20-21, 2005

Additional details and registration information about the NERA conference can be found on their website:

[www.nereading.org](http://www.nereading.org)



frequent spellings which the letter(s) represent. Lists of "words for instruction" complete the chart. These word lists include words with the letter(s) in the initial, final, or medial positions depending on the specific letter or letter combination. The linguistic information provided in these charts enable teachers to be well-informed as they implement systematic and explicit phonics instruction. Section 4 focuses on instructional ideas for phonics. Over ten pages of this section include word lists for word family chunks sorted by vowel sounds. This section also includes two sample assessment tools. *Phonics from A to Z: A Practical Guide* concludes with a section on adapting phonics instruction to meet the individual needs of students.

Additional information and details about the content of *Phonics from A to Z: A Practical Guide* can be obtained at the Scholastic website at the following address

<http://shop.scholastic.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/ProductDisplay?langId=-1&storeId=10001&categoryId=null&catalogId=10002&productId=14014>

## Related Children's Literature Title...

### Word Wizard by Cathryn Falwell

An author from Gorham, Maine, Cathryn Falwell, has created a fun adventure for children to explore and learn about the relationships of letters and sounds. In *Word Wizard*, Anna, the word wizard, helps a boy who is lost find his way home by rearranging the letters in a word to create a new word. Each new word helps the boy get closer to home. Read along to see how the *ocean* becomes a *canoe* which carries Anna and the boy to shore and how sour *lemons* become yummy *melons* for them to eat on their adventure. The final page encourages readers to become word wizards. This book was published by Clarion Books in 1998. The ISBN number is 0-395-85580-2.

## Description of Instructional Idea...

### Word Sorts

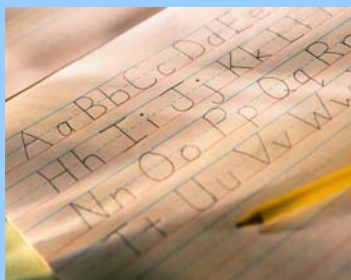
A word sort is a phonics instructional activity which encourages students to explore and discover the relationships between letters and sounds. Word sorts are flexible because they can be adapted to focus on different spelling patterns. The first step in designing a word sort is to select a spelling pattern on which to focus. Words can be sorted based on vowel sounds (long or short), consonant letter or letter combinations which represent different sounds, word endings, syllables, etc. To begin a word sort, a list of words is created to match the focus. Word sorts can be completed on a pocket chart, overhead projector, easel, or individual sheets of paper depending on the needs of the students and the tools available. A word sort should always begin with an invitation for the students to share what they notice about the list of words. The students then sort the words. Word sorts can be either closed (teachers identify the rule for which the words should be sorted) or open (students sort the words without any rule). Students are encouraged to share observations and discoveries throughout the process of completing the word sort.

For example, a completed word sort which focuses on the vowel sounds for "a" might look like this:

Short /a/	Long /a/	Oddballs
cap gas back fast	cape day chain rail	was march

*"To become skilled readers, students must be able to identify words quickly and accurately. And to do that, they must be proficient at decoding words."*

Wiley Blevins, 2001



*"Teaching phonics is a task that requires disciplined, sequenced coverage of individual elements and their interrelations, as well as continuous evaluation of students' levels of mastery."*

Marilyn Jager Adams,  
1990



hat patch	lake freight	
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An appropriate second step for this sample word sort would ask students to sort the "Long /a/" column based on the spelling patterns of the words included.

CVCe	-ay	-ai	Other
cape lake	day	chain rail	freight

This example illustrates how word sorts help students explore how words that sound the same can be spelled very differently. (Several professional resources include pre-made word lists to be used for word sorts. Two possible resource books are: *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction* by Donald Bear, Marcia Invernizzi, Shane Templeton, and Francine Johnston and *Word Journeys: Assessment-Guided Phonics, Spelling, and Vocabulary Instruction* by Kathy Ganske.)

## News from Maine Reading First...

Maine Reading First is pleased to announce that the Maine Reading First Statewide Course is being offered in 25 sites around the state for the 2005-2006 year. Ten of these sites are schools which received Maine Reading First sub-grants and the other 15 sites are schools which did not receive a sub-grant. Over 550 educators are participating in the course at these sites. Any school in the state can request to have the Maine Reading First Statewide Course offered. If you are interested in offering the course in your school or District during the 2006-2007 school year, please submit a request to [janet.trembly@maine.gov](mailto:janet.trembly@maine.gov)

### Check it out...

The June, 2005 edition of the "SEDL Letter" published by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) is devoted entirely to the the topic of reading. Some of the titles of this edition's articles include:

- "Literacy Coaches"
- "Motivating Students to Read"
- "Improving Comprehension"

This newsletter can be accessed at the following website

<http://www.sedl.org/pubs/sedl-letter>.

An earlier edition of the "SEDL Letter" may also be of interest. The December, 2002 edition, "Putting Reading First", includes articles such as, "The Importance of Phonemic Awareness" and "Making Every Teacher a Reading Teacher". The December, 2002 newsletter can be accessed online at <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/sedl-letter/v14n03/>

For additional information about any of the items in this newsletter or to sign up to receive this e-newsletter, please email [janet.trembly@maine.gov](mailto:janet.trembly@maine.gov)

Click here to view the Maine Reading First website  
<http://www.maine.gov/education/rf/homepage.htm>

